

Sex-and-Relationship Vasana

Sundari (Isabella Viglietti)

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Shila: Dear Sundari, this is my first email to a Vedanta teacher. I've been studying lectures and writings by James and *satsangs* since last year. My sister met James during her travels to India, and when I needed some help to get out from the vicious circle of binding *vasanas* she simply sent me a link to YouTube sessions of James. And it worked.

I have no difficulties with most of the teachings, they organize in a systematic way things I felt for a long time, even always as a matter of fact.

Sundari: Good to hear from you, Shila. I am so glad that *Isvara* sent you to James when you needed guidance and it helped. When self-inquiry is new, especially with Vedanta, it is important that the teachings are properly taught or they will be interpreted by the ego.

Shila: But there is a one binding *vasana* that is persistent: a craving for a relationship or for regular sex. I/Shila have never been in a long relationship; I am in my mid-thirties now. I was not interested in sex as well for a long time. It changed few years back, and as I see it now. *Isvara* has put my way the right people to help me in starting my sex life, but not a relationship. I know I am not a doer. But I can't help the thought that maybe I am doing something against my *svadharma*.

Isn't it that sex is a natural thing and that it should be a part of one's life? I have slept with few guys but it wasn't working for me, as those were mostly one-night stands. So I don't go on this fast path anymore, at least I am not doing anything that starts this path. I feel best when I am away from all this sex/relationship/love *vasana*, but I feel it's not the right attitude, I mean to avoid it all, that it is a *tamasic*, not *sattvic*, attitude, and that it is not in the spirit of self-knowledge. But I lack a clear view on this subject, especially when people around me are entering relationships or my male friends are sharing that they cannot imagine life without sex, the casual one mostly, and they strongly advise me to do it as well as a healthy solution - which is not working for me as I know now.

I have read few *satsangs* on that topic but I still have some difficulties with solving this riddle on my own.

Thank you for your time.

~ All the best, Shila

Sundari: The short answer on the relationship issue:

There are two issues here, the need for sex and the need for a relationship and their origin is the same - the belief that you are incomplete and need something to complete you. Those pesky *vasanas*! Well, you can't blame the *vasanas*, so let's look deeper. Forgive me if I state the obvious here and there. Self-inquiry is always about

the why. In this case, why do you need sex or a relationship? The short answer, which is always the best, is: you don't esteem/love yourself enough to be happy with yourself. If you love yourself as you should, either you most likely would not have a problem attracting an appropriate mate or you would be happy being alone – which really means: ALL ONE. There is no point in dredging up your childhood to explain the origin of the feeling of lovelessness; it gets us nowhere.

The main issue here (as it is the problem underlying all our psychological problems) is that you are not getting what you want and you are unhappy because you believe that is not right. I strongly suggest that you investigate the teachings, first on values, then on the qualifications required for self-inquiry, and very important, on *karma yoga*. You will find these teaching extensively explained in James' books and in many *satsangs* and videos at the website.

If we don't appreciate ourselves as the love that we seek, we seek it in another. The irony is that what you seek in another you always have in the form of yourself, insofar as you only want the "other" because it puts you in touch with yourself. You already seem to have realised that looking for love in a relationship doesn't work. I know it doesn't work. Scripture says it doesn't work. World literature says it doesn't work. Why? **Because you are what you are seeking.** But this fact is not known by you in such a way that it neutralizes the desire for love – or sex. We hope that this knowledge becomes hard and fast at some point, but whether or not it does is up to *Isvara*, so let's consider two more options.

In this option, we throw the hungry *vasana* dog a bone. It is based on the idea that the kind of love you seek is out there waiting for you but the way you are going about it is inappropriate and untimely (remember *svadharma*, appropriate and timely action?). It is difficult to talk about this problem because the ego may very well beg to differ and it may get irritated at me for saying it. Nonetheless, I will state the (probably unwelcome) obvious: confused people looking for love from people who don't know what love is seldom produces long-term happiness. It does not remove the confusion nor does it equal love. To state the obvious again: nobody wants a relationship for *moksa* – freedom. Well, maybe *moksa* from loneliness, but freedom from loneliness is not *moksa*. People seek a relationship only because they believe that by having someone in their lives they will be more complete, happier, more full. **But *moksa*, freedom, is freedom from dependence on objects for happiness, fullness.**

Liberation or the quest for liberation does not mean that one should not have a relationship. It means that the seeker primed for self-inquiry does not actively seek a relationship, if liberation is the main aim, because it has already tried that and it does not work. Should a relationship opportunity present itself and it does not distract the mind from self-inquiry, the relationship should be taken with the *karma yoga* spirit – as a gift from *Isvara* – and seen as part of one's spiritual practice. A "spiritual" practice is any practice that is conducive to peace of mind. If the relationship-thought still consumes the mind with desire and it can neither resist it by sublimating the desire through self-inquiry nor engage the relationship without losing peace of mind, self-inquiry will no longer be possible.

Freedom from self-ignorance is *moksa*. So for option two to work, I'd say you need to get a bit more realistic. If you insist on a relationship, if or when Mr. Right shows up, do the relationship as *karma yoga*. Relationships can be useful spiritually, as the energy you formerly spent hunting for one can be profitably invested in higher pursuits, assuming the relationship is *dharmic* and does not consume the mind with

agitating thoughts/desires and feelings.

Option three: woman up! Commit yourself to *moksa* as defined by Vedanta and make a vow to stand up to the sex *vasana* until it completely dies. Make a binding contract with yourself, like no dating for one year, to be extended if necessary. When you see someone you are attracted to, avert your eyes; don't let fantasies take root. Forgive me for being honest, but if you are trying to have your cake and eat it too (which maybe is not the case here), it doesn't work. If you want a relationship, go for it and forget about freedom from limitation – *moksa*. Wallow in sex/relationships until you are completely convinced they don't work and the dispassion conducive to *moksa* develops. It seems you are not quite convinced that relationship love is a dead-end street. If you think about your recent experiences though, you will realise that even when it was good, you were still alone, unsatisfied and unhappy. **Vedanta calls your situation lack of *purushartha nischaya*, clarity with reference to what you want.**

The Long Answer on the Sex Business

Values determine how sexual conditioning plays out in one's love life. There is no point trying to suppress or deny this *vasana*, because it comes with the territory of being human. Since primitive forms of life appeared on this planet, the most basic macrocosmic impulse is to procreate and to proliferate. In fact, from an evolutionary point of view, it can be said that sex is just a reward system to encourage us to pass on our genes! It would appear that our genes use us to replicate themselves. One can indulge it unreservedly or exert control over this drive by transmuting the energy into spiritual work. If peace of mind is the goal, a healthy *dharmic* attitude to sex is essential. There is nothing inherently right or wrong with sex, with or without love; it all depends on what you value most. The misuse and abuse of sexual energy, however, is one of the main causes of suffering, engendering self-abasement and abuse.

Sex is a natural urge and a source of great pleasure, which when associated with a sense of low self-esteem or incompleteness may become perverted. There is a great deal of pleasure locked in the human body, whether through food, sex or anything else. *Isvara* makes it possible, but it comes at a price when self-ignorance rules the mind. Pleasure is a double-edged sword. We can neither avoid nor over-indulge it without paying a high price. It is a dangerous energy because it can be a slippery slope to binding *vasanas*. But there is nothing wrong with bodily pleasure if it does not contravene *dharma*. When associated with a sense of low self-esteem or incompleteness, however, sex may become perverted and cause terrible suffering.

Cultural and Religious Mores

In ancient times, Eastern spiritual traditions saw sex and the sexual organs as one of the most common symbols of the bliss of the self. They assumed a mythic status and functioned as metaphors for the creation and enlightenment. One must use common sense in our attitudes to sex as in everything else. A prudish or abstemious attitude denies a very natural tendency, turning it into something ugly, something to fear and suppress. East and West, most of the major religions have a hand in promoting unhealthy ideas about sex. India in the last 70 years has become a highly repressed and prudish society due to the influence of the English Victorian rulers. There are now lots of taboos and negative attitudes towards sex, which developed because the

society turned against it, other than for procreation. When one must work so hard to deny something so natural and inbuilt, it becomes like a formidable foe one must fight at every turn, engendering unnatural behaviour. You know the saying: what you resist persists! But there is some value in and reason why most religions and cultures developed taboos about sex. It can quickly become one's downfall when denied or abused.

The War of the Sexes

Sex can also be used to control and manipulate. Since caveman times, the birth of society and civilisation, control of sex and the birthing process has been a common theme in securing dominance, particularly by men. Whenever different cultures go to war, raping of the women is and has been the norm, with devastating effect. Sex is inextricably linked to the war of the sexes and the roles people play as "man" and "woman," both parties utilizing sex as a tool to gain power over and exploit the other, with men often gaining the upper hand. Disenfranchised women who perceive themselves as powerless often resort to using sex to get what they want. Both sexes fear each other as a result, causing damage to each other and their offspring.

The Yoga View

What often confuses inquirers are statements made by Yoga about sex, particularly by Sivananda, an Indian *sannyasi* who took the vow of celibacy. He was not a householder, and so for him sex was prohibited. Yoga is very beneficial for purifying the mind. But many *yogis* are hooked into the idea of improving the *jiva* instead of understanding it in the light of self-knowledge and dis-identifying with it. Sivananda seemed to suggest that *moksa* is unattainable for anyone unless you "do" something about sex in particular, and pleasure in general. This doing is either renunciation or turning the sexual urge into a complicated act of purification. By exhorting his followers to abstain from sex or transform the sex act, Sivananda focused on the body and the doer instead of negating both. Of course there is a particular *dharma* for an inquirer, which includes a holy (whole) attitude to the body and its needs.

There are different levels of *sannyas*. You can be a *sannyasi* but not take the vow of celibacy, such as James and me. If one has taken the vow of celibacy, sex is out of bounds, and you need a *sadhana* to help you sublimate it. The sexual urge does not just go away at will. Whether you are a householder or not, sex may or may not be an impediment to self-inquiry. It all depends on the motivation for having it.

Is Sexual Sublimation a Qualification for Moksa?

We are often asked if sex sublimation is a necessary precondition or qualification for self-inquiry or *moksa*. It is not – unless sex is a binding *vasana*. However, sublimation can and is used effectively to render any binding *vasana* non-binding. As inquirers, whenever we have a desire for an object that is contrary to *dharma*, we neutralize the desire by sublimating it to a higher idea – freedom from bondage to the desire, which is taking a stand in awareness as awareness and applying the opposite thought.

Sannyasis sublimate the sexual energy into love of the self, which over time and with dedicated practise automatically disperses or elevates the craving. There is no

advice for or against any sexual practice in Vedanta other than for those who have taken the vow of celibacy. For worldly inquirers, self-inquiry is for mature people who have worked out their psychological issues. **For self-knowledge to work to remove ignorance, we have negated the doer, put an end to all self-insulting and injurious actions and rendered binding vasanas non-binding.** Self-knowledge does not mean that we must give up sex or, for men, abstain from ejaculation, a doubt we come across as well. As a husband/partner in a committed relationship, it is part of one's *dharma* to pleasure one's partner through satisfying sex.

The Origin of the Craving

The main issue is the craving for sex, the desire for human contact, which is what is craved, not sex. **The craving itself is the issue,** as craving anything – from food to the company of others – is only present when our true nature as non-dual, whole and complete, unlimited and unchanging awareness is not understood and valued. Such a mind does not understand that its true nature is unconditional love – and it can neither gain or lose it. We feel incomplete, so we chase objects in the vain hope that they will give us what we think we lack, which never works, not for long. The actual source of the craving is the desire for wholeness. In other words, it is a psychological problem which can only have a spiritual solution, meaning self-inquiry. Denying or indulging the craving (for sex or anything else) never solves the craving but exacerbates it, as you have found out.

Renunciation

Both powers, renunciation and action, exist in everyone. Individuals constantly act, and they constantly let go of things they no longer value or desire. The only issue is the nature of that which is to be renounced. If an individual wants freedom, which as stated above Vedanta defines as **freedom from dependence on objects,** renunciation becomes a problem because individuals value things that conflict with the desire for freedom. And liberation requires a very subtle renunciation: renunciation of the renouncer, the one seeking freedom.

As an inquirer and householder or worldly person, it might very well be necessary to sublimate the sex *vasana* to render it non-binding. **This kind of renunciation is advisable if moksa is the aim and sex is a powerfully binding vasana.** But this kind of renunciation is not denial. It is the understanding that nothing is gained by indulging this *vasana*, so one makes a different choice every time the craving arises, by sublimating the desire with the opposite thought, with the *karma yoga* attitude. And as a *jiva*, if you truly want to improve your self-esteem, a sure way to do this is to say no whenever the desire to act out a binding sexual *vasana* arises and sublimate it to a higher thought. This takes dedicated practise, especially if the *vasana* is deeply entrenched and binding, but it can be done, depending what you want most. Every time you give in to the desire, self-esteem decreases. What is your value to yourself? What price freedom?

Karma Yoga

Karma yoga means that you dedicate your actions and surrender the results to *Isvara* before you do them. However, unless sex is an expression of love, it is a

purely *rajasic* action, based solely on the fulfilment of your short-term needs. There is no real concern for the needs of the other when sex is not an expression of love. Attachment to sex, not sex itself, is the problem spiritually. *Rajas* produces attachment and agitation, and it is inevitably accompanied by dullness (*tamas*), neither of which is conducive to inquiry or satisfying long-term fulfilment and peace of mind. Although sex produces temporary short-term satisfaction or *sattva*, it does not last, and the long-term effect is dullness, *tamas*. The practice of *karma yoga* requires *sattvic* actions, and sex is not a *sattvic* action unless it is an expression of love. When sex is engaged with the *karma yoga* attitude, it does not matter what the result is. There may or may not be a climax, such as orgasm. What matters is the mutual energy of love. That is the take-away – **and it does last, because love is who you are.** In this case, the reason for having sex is not solely for your own pleasure. It is to give pleasure in a sacred way that is satisfying no matter what the result.

What Is Dharmic or Adharmic Sex?

Adharmic sex is contrary to one's value system and sex that is injurious to oneself and others. It is not appropriate for someone whose goal is liberation. There is no way that it leads to self-knowledge, because it makes pre-existing binding *vasanas* more binding and prevents self-inquiry.

Infidelity and Multiple Sex Partners

Adharmic sex is a lie; infidelity, for example. From a Vedantic point of view, value for fidelity is important, as sex with others is not *dharmic* for people who are in committed love relationships. It contravenes the *dharma* of love which forms the basis of trust and emotional honesty essential in any love relationship. If a person wants sexual freedom, this must work for both people, which is sometimes possible for worldly people. However, for most people, whether they are interested in self-inquiry or not, sexual freedom and committed relationship are totally opposed and do not work. At its core, this pattern is about self-indulgence and greed. These are negative values that exist because of an inherent lack of self-esteem, self-love and honesty, the essence of ego-based selfishness, which will erode any relationship sooner or later.

Sex with multiple partners, same-sex partners or sex without love is not essentially *adharmic* if there is no coercion or exploitation involved and in keeping with the values the people involved hold. The self is not concerned with flesh rubbing on flesh. It happens all the time in various ways, when two people shake hands, for instance. Sexual greed (*rajas*), however, is as bad as any other kind of greed. Justifying all kinds of unholy behaviour to satiate this insatiable need may create all manner of perversions and often leads to an attempt legitimize *adharmic* behaviour.

Most people who have serial affairs or multiple sexual partners use them for their self-indulgent gratification, either denying what they are doing or justifying it in the name of "freedom," truth utilized in the service of ignorance. The underlying problem is, as always, lack of self-love and binding *vasanas*. If you have a sex *vasana* and have a lot of work to do on the qualifications for *moksa* (as many inquirers do), it is more than likely that having sex with multiple partners, watching porn or fantasizing is simply a desperate need to feel whole.

Tantra

Turning sex into yoga (*tantra*) tends to legitimize it as a path to enlightenment, which creates binding attachment. *Tantra* is not only not a legitimate path to enlightenment; it is also not conducive to self-inquiry. Although many who teach *tantra* claim otherwise, *tantra* does build *vasanas* and can also be a way to spiritualize them, making them harder to break. Making a big story out of sex by turning it into a spiritual practice creates attachment to it, reinforcing the idea that there is something you can “do” about sex to transform it, and in doing so turning into an “evolved” spiritual practice. Sex is not the problem; the craving and the doer are the problem.

The Healthy View of Sex

Non-binding sex with love is beautiful and natural, whether one is in a committed relationship or not or in a same-sex relationship. Sex with love is sex with feeling, where your partner’s needs are taken into consideration, and there is a connection. It’s not purely to satisfy your needs. Non-binding sex is not a big deal and not an obstacle to self-inquiry or *moksa*.

Binding sex without love purely to satisfy your needs, whether one is having sex with prostitutes, random consenting strangers or your partner is ugly, unnatural and does become a big deal. It is an obstacle to self-inquiry and *moksa*. Even a “normal” desire for sex can become *adharmic* in a marriage or committed relationship with someone you love if it is a binding *vasana*. The main issue is the motivation as it is with the desire for any object. Krishna says: “I am the desire that is not opposed to *dharma*.”

Shila: Thank you very much for your prompt and explicit reply. It is not easy truth to swallow, but as I was reading it I felt more calm and motivated to take the radical steps. In my situation, it is best to take the third option, as I need to burn this binding *vasana* to the ground. At this point I am sure taking *karma yoga* attitude towards a relationship would be impossible, as my *jiva* is too needy and *vasana*-driven.

I will follow your guidelines on this matter. I am constantly reading about qualifications and *karma yoga*, and as you said – results are up to *Isvara* – but I keep refreshing the knowledge so that it will stay firm one day. 😊

Sundari: Good for you, Shila! The truth is sometimes a bit tough, but the most important thing to see is that this *vasana* (as all *vasanas*) is not your doing. You did not make yourself this way, this is what *Isvara* gave you to manage. Don’t be hard on yourself or beat yourself up about it; you are very honest, and I can see your desire to be free is genuine. If you truly dedicate your mind to the scripture, self-knowledge will dissolve this binding *vasana* and free the mind from limitation. I advise you also to read up as much as possible on the *gunas*. We are busy bringing about a book on this very important teaching, but James has written extensively about this.

Shila: Thank you for reminding that this set of *vasanas* was given to me to manage

instead of being developed by my *jiva*; it is helpful. I feel now like a driver of the chariot. 😊

Sundari: As your true essence is awareness, self-knowledge is the best driver to have of the ego if freedom from suffering is our main aim, that is for sure! In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna symbolizing awareness guides his friend Arjuna in how to drive his chariot (the ego) into war (doing battle with the *vasanas* and following his *svadharma*).

In your case, as you have honestly and correctly determined that if you had a relationship you would not be able to render the *vasana* for completion through the “other” or through sex, it is better for you that you abstain until self-knowledge is firm.

May *Isvara* guide your every step and strengthen your resolve through self-inquiry. We are here for you if you need help.

~ Love, Sundari